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SUBJECT: CHAVEZ LOSING SUPPORT AMIDST SHIFT IN VOTER MOOD.

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SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) A poll and a focus group study on Venezuelan politics published at the end of March highlighted President Hugo Chavez' job approval rating falling from 44% to 36%. The poll suggests that the National Electoral Council's handling of the signature verification process for the Presidential recall referendum may be costing Chavez support. The focus group study shows growing frustration with the opposition leaders, and a desire on all sides for a more inclusive politics, aimed at forging national unity, solving future problems, and preventing instability. The poll was done by an American consulting firm for a group of Chavez opponents. An Argentine consultant, working under the auspices of the National Democratic Institute, did the focus groups. END
SUMMARY

Chavez losing support

¶2. (C) U.S. consultants Greenberg, Quinlan and Rosner Research, working for a group of Venezuelans opposed to President Hugo Chavez, polled 1,000 likely voters in the middle of March. Mark Feierstien briefed the Ambassador on the results of the poll on March 27. PolOff obtained additional poll information reported here separately on the condition it not be disseminated broadly. (Please protect.)

¶3. (C) The poll shows that President Chavez, approval numbers have declined from 51% opposed-44% in favor in October to 60% opposed-36% in favor now. Additionally, the percentage of the population willing to vote in favor of a presidential recall has risen from 52% in October to 62% now, while those who would vote against has dropped from 42% to 31%. 52% of those polled declared they had voted for Chavez in 2000. March's negative numbers closely resemble those of summer 2003, when Chavez, support was at its lowest. 62% of respondents disapprove of how Chavez is handling the economy, while 37% approve. In the government's handling of crime, 71% disapprove and 27% approve. This is significant, as 57% of respondent's said unemployment was one of their top concerns, and 34% put crime at the top, both far above any other factor.

CNE line backfiring?

¶4. (C) Overall support for the CNE has also declined since October from 63% to 40%, with disapproval rising from 24% to 56%. When asked why the CNE had ruled against the validity of so many signatures, 64% of those polled said it was for political reasons, while 31% said it was for technical reasons. There is a strong correlation between respondent's evaluation of the nature of the CNE's decision, and their intention to vote in a recall referendum. This suggests Chavez, perceived intervention in the process may be alienating voters.

Referendum still has support

¶5. (C) The Greenberg poll shows 60% of respondents continue to favor the recall process, while 30% think Venezuelans should give up. A close correlation exists with the 58% who fear the failure of the process will lead to violence and instability, and the 30% who think things will settle down if the process fails. The OAS and Carter Center enjoy the support of 69% of those polled, while 25% disapprove.

Little support for anti-US rhetoric

¶6. (C) 70% of those polled blamed the Venezuelan government for the poor state of U.S.-Venezuelan relations, while 76% disagreed with President Chavez' threat not to sell oil to the U.S. General attitudes about the U.S. were divided,

according to a part of the poll that measured feelings towards various institutions and leaders. The lowest levels of support were for members of the government such as Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel, CNE President Francisco Carrasquero, Supreme Court Ivan Justice Rincon, and former Infrastructure Minister Diosdado Cabello.

Shift in political culture?

17. (U) Caracas daily El Universal reported April 4 the results of Graciela Romer & Associates focus group study conducted in February 2003. (Romer has been conducting the focus groups under the auspices of the National Democratic Institute) The study shows signs of an easing of political tensions, and demands for a more inclusive politics, capable of bringing the nation together, and solving problems. There was a recognition that the present government's anti-poverty agenda was legitimate, and worth saving, and a recognition that whatever the outcome of the referendum process, the Chavistas are here to stay.

18. (U) Those questioned seemed increasingly worried, as the prospect of an actual referendum grew, of the likely long-term result. They stressed the need for the next government to have real solutions to the problems of the country, and for there to be some way of including the political losers of the process in the future political consensus. The zero sum game of pro or anti Chavez politics is seen by many participants as a dangerous fantasy, which fails to account for the fact that both positions have entrenched supporters.

19. (SBU) The Romer study indicates there may be a political center space in public opinion that is currently not represented in the political leadership of the opposition, the government, or the media. (In the poll, 44% of respondents identified with no political party.) Opposition supporters and independents recognized the value of some of the government's anti-poverty programs, and its political mobilization of the country. Meanwhile supporters of the President acknowledge corruption and intolerance in the government. The study points to an increasing desire for national unity, and a tolerant inclusive dialogue on both parts.

10. (U) The focus groups saw the referendum as an opportunity to resolve the political impasse peacefully. The referendum was not, however, seen as a panacea. Many viewed the opposition with suspicion, as having too many links to the past, and being unable to present any vision of the future beyond getting rid of Chavez. The danger of the referendum simply reversing the roles of the opposition and the Chavistas, but not stabilizing the political situation, worried many of the focus group participants on both sides of the political divide.

COMMENT

11. (C) The two studies reinforce one another. The GQR study indicates Chavez is being punished for undermining the referendum and exacerbating polarization since the signature verification process started. The Romer study suggests that the opposition is failing to generate strong positive support among the public, due to its inability to produce a unified positive and inclusive message, and the dominant position of political holdovers from the pre-Chavez era. The two studies are the only measures of public opinion we've seen so far this year. They present an important snapshot of the political situation as Venezuelans continue to toil to find a peaceful solution to the country's political impasse.
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